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## A tale of three cities: negotiating ethnic identity and acculturation in northwest China

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## A tale of three cities: negotiating ethnic identity and acculturation in northwest China

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### ABSTRACT

Through extensive interviews with Hui, Han, Dongxiang, and Tibetan migrants and participant observation in northwest China between 2013 and 2015, we examine how the negotiation of ethnic identity influences acculturation strategies in three cultural contexts by scrutinizing the three operational aspects of ethnic identity: perceptions, affections, and behaviors. We argue that the ethnic identity is negotiated at both the group and individual levels as a relation of dialectical unification in regard to fixity and fluidity. At the group level, ethnic identity is relatively fixed and rigid and is perceived by most of the group members as the social norms which normalize ethnic behavior collectively. At the individual level, on the other hand, ethnic identity can be highly flowing and contested from one individual to another. Han identity is generally self-perceived as unmarked, porous, situated, and sometimes even vacuous. Han migrants' acculturation is more dependent on the cultural context of the host society. Hui and Dongxiang migrants show a strong attachment and affective bonds to their ethnic identity, which is largely based on religious identity. Although Tibetan migrants perceive a complex, place-based identity related to their religion, the grassland, their traditional ways of living, and their language, a Tibetan identity seems to be difficult to fulfill given their economic vulnerability and the contradictions between retaining traditions and being Sinicized in the city.

**KEYWORDS** Ethnic identity; acculturation; migration; representation; northwest China

### Framing ethnic identity and acculturation

Against the background of rapid urbanization and the Western Development Campaign, rural-to-urban population mobility is gradually increasing in northwest China (NWC). Migrants in the region have substantially different ethnic origins compared to those in eastern and central regions of China, because not only is NWC the homeland of the majority Han but it also

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home to many ethnic minorities, mainly Muslims and Tibetans. Berry (2008) asserts that social engagement among migrants with different ethnic identities leads to a process of acculturation, a process important for local socioeconomic development, social stability, and migrant well-being (Berry 2006; Yoon Lee and Goh 2008), especially since tensions have already arisen among different ethnic groups in NWC (Hasmath 2014).

However, there is insufficient research to understand how the ethnic identity of migrants influences their acculturation in NWC. This is not surprising, given the sensitivity of Chinese ethnic issues, lack of accessibility for scholars, and scant data for this region. Furthermore, migrant ethnic identity in the acculturation process is positioned and conditioned by the cultural context of the receiving society (Kaplan and Chacko 2015). In China, regional ethnic autonomy is assigned by the regional governments at different administrative levels where minority groups have been congregated by the Chinese government. Within these autonomous entities, although the minorities do not dominate politically, the central authority of China has given minority groups a certain degree of freedom to foster their own language, religion, and culture. This raises two questions that we address in this paper: (1) How do migrants interpret and negotiate ethnic identities in their new cultural contexts? And, (2) how do migrants' ethnic identities influence their acculturation to a new cultural context?

### ***Negotiating ethnic boundaries and operationalizing ethnic identity***

Most scholars agree that ethnic identity is developed within a constructionist framework, where ethnic identity is seen as fluid, situational, and negotiated by and through the context of group contacts (Barthe 1969; Phinney 2003; Sullivan 2012). Ethnic identity construction involves the negotiation of ethnic boundaries, where the individuals label "self" and "others" in terms of their ethnic categories (Wimmer 2008). Such labeling employs the process of othering, which is achieved by maximizing the distinctiveness of those outside the group ("out-group"), and the similarities of those inside a specific ethnic group ("in-group") (Brewer 1991; Nagel 1994; Rijnks and Strijker 2013). The constructionist point of view argues against the existence of essential traits of ethnic identity, thereby allowing for new forms of representations of ethnic identity to develop when different cultural groups encounter each other during migration (Chacko 2015). Ethnic identity is performed as a perpetual negotiation and renegotiation between different ethnic groups rather than drawing a fixed boundary (Bhabha 1990; Zhu and Qian 2015). Lee and Park (2008) highlighted the pivotal role of cultural attributes in different geographical locations to the creation of situational identity, because the ethnic identity of arriving groups is highlighted and amplified when it interacts with cultural context of the receiving ethnic groups.

At the moment of culture encounter, arriving groups with alienated cultural backgrounds and receiving groups immediately start to renegotiate boundaries and redefine their identities as a result of three factors: perceptions (how do the actors perceive their own ethnic identity and others' ethnic identities), affections (how do the actors forge their affective bonds and attachment to their ethnic identities), and behaviors (how do the actors act in their daily life and how the actors alter their behaviors in the different cultural contexts). In this article, we examine the ethnic identity of migrants based on these three components.

The intentions and meanings of the migrants' performances of their identities reflect their own perceptions of what that ethnic identity entails (Carlin 2017). Actors apply stereotypes as a result of the *perception* that ethnic identity is characterized by inherent allegiance to particular elements that are fixed and unchanging, in order to normalize the specific signifiers (Chirkov 2009; Skop and Li 2017). Such stereotyped signifiers are often exaggerated and oversimplified. The stereotype relies on the concept of fixity, indicating the repetitive and rigid part of ethnic identity (Bhabha 1994; Ridanpää 2014). Due to what they perceive as the norms of the ethnic category, actors associate their *affection* with a specific ethnic group in order to fulfill the desire for ethnic identification and obtain a sense of belonging (Brown 2000; Owens et al. 2010). Ethnic identity negotiation also stresses the importance of ethnic *behavior* (Hogg and Reid 2006). Although ethnic behavior may be an unreliable guide to actors' ethnic identity (Schechner 2013), people nevertheless associate specific behaviors with certain ethnic groups as a mean of constructing "otherness". Ethnic identity is also symbolically reflected in language, food preferences, and religious practices.

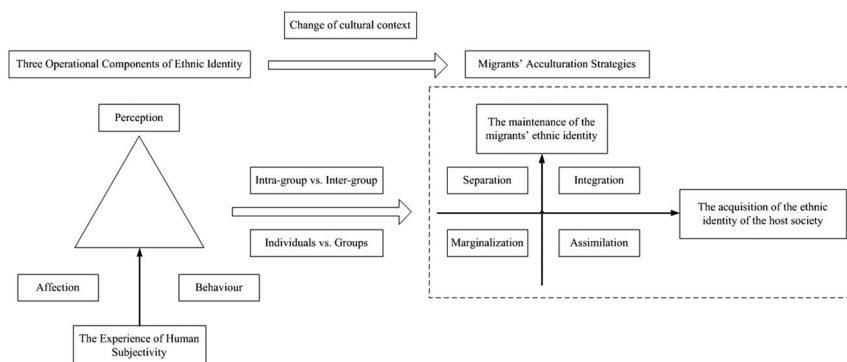
China is portrayed by its own state media propaganda as a unified multi-ethnic country (*tongyi de duo minzu guojia*), home to the Han majority (*Hanzu*), and 55 minority ethnic groups (*shaoshu minzu*), all of whom enjoy social equality through a series of preferential policies for minority groups (similar to U.S. affirmative action policies). The official classification of ethnic minorities is, however, highly politicized (*zhengzhijia*, Ma 2007) and arbitrarily based on the state-orchestrated ethnic classification (*minzu shibie*, Mullaney 2011) launched in the 1950s. In the eyes of the state, ethnic identity is pre-programmed and non-negotiable. According to Mullaney (2011), this essentialist viewpoint only catches up with presupposed primordial ethnic characteristics, while overlooking the contingencies, variation, and fluctuations of ethnic identity. In this sense, ethnic identity formation is mainly institutionalized and enforced as a tool of political or economic manipulation by authorities (Jenkins 1997; Skop 2017). Although the *minzu shibie* is an official, state-sanctioned project, ordinary Chinese people, especially the minorities discussed in this article, are aware of their official ethnic identities.

### Connecting ethnic identity to acculturation

The assumption of acculturation was developed from the experience of migrants in the U.S. as an alternative to a linear, bipolar framework, which assumed a process of ethno-cultural encountering as one waxing, another waning (Miyares 1997). In contrast, Berry (1992) formulated acculturation, the idea that different cultural orientations of a migrant are independent of each other to a certain extent. In this view, migrants' ethnic identity can be conceptualized through four acculturation strategies, *integration*, *assimilation*, *separation*, and *marginalization*, based on two variables: the migrants' relative tendency to retain their original identity (maintaining the cultural heritage of their society of origin) and their tendency to obtain the ethnic identity of the host group (or adopting cultural characteristics from the host society). Integration occurs when migrants adopt the cultural characteristics of the host society while also keeping their own ethnic cultural heritage, assimilation occurs when the migrant adopts aspects of the new culture while also giving up their original identity, and separation happens when the migrant maintains their original culture and does not adopt the new one. Marginalization strategy manifests as refusing both cultural heritages of the host society and the society of origin (Phinney 1990). Acculturation is the process of psychological or cultural change occurring in both groups and individuals after engaging in intercultural contact (Berry 1992). At the group level, it involves changes such as collective actions, social institutions, cultural forms, and group solidarity (Berry 1997). At the individual level, it involves changes in attitudes, behavior, and even loyalty.

The acculturation strategies mentioned above mainly derive from a universalist perspective, which presupposes homogeneous ethnic identities (Berry and Sam 1997). This may be problematic since there are no "pure" or unitary identities that have never experienced change. From the interpretive perspective, ethnic identity formation provides us a way to explain acculturation through symbols, meanings, representations, and performances because "people intentionally reason their actions through a meaningful socio-cultural context" (Chirkov 2009, p. 96). The dialectical relationship between group and individual acculturation is reflected in changes in intersubjective and subjective meanings, that is, migrants construct their identities at the group level collectively through normalizing and consenting "shared essences" while individuals label the categories and negotiate the meanings of their identities according to their own perceptions and interpretations (Hollis 2002; Skop 2006; Carlin 2017). Acculturation is therefore not only an objectively identified and sculpted paradigm but may also be subjectively perceived and fluidly negotiated. It is from this perspective that we approached our analysis.

As Cox (2014) argues, the social-cultural context would not even exist were it not for human agency reproducing or retransforming it. In this



**Figure 1.** Theoretical framework (adapted from Berry 1992, Hogg and Reid 2006, Phinney and Ong 2007, Carlin 2017).

article, human agency is essential because the arguments of ethnic identity formation are mainly established from the raw materials drawn from our in-depth interviews. The theoretical framework for our study appears in Figure 1. We examine migrants' perceptions, affections, and behaviors at both individual (i.e. how individuals execute ethnic identity through symbols, representations, and performance) and group levels (normative meanings, e.g. collective actions, specific cultural forms, and group solidarity) to illustrate how individual migrants negotiate their ethnic identities in different cultural contexts. We argue that the ways in which migrants perceive their ethnic identities, and how they feel they are perceived by outsiders, influence their acculturation differently in different social-cultural contexts. Our aim in this article is to build a bridge between ethnic identity and acculturation by discussing three operational components and meanings of ethnic identity. We assume that the four strategies of acculturation are rooted in fluid rather than fixed conceptions of identities and are based on the subjectivity of individual migrants during their negotiation of ethnic identity.

## Data sources

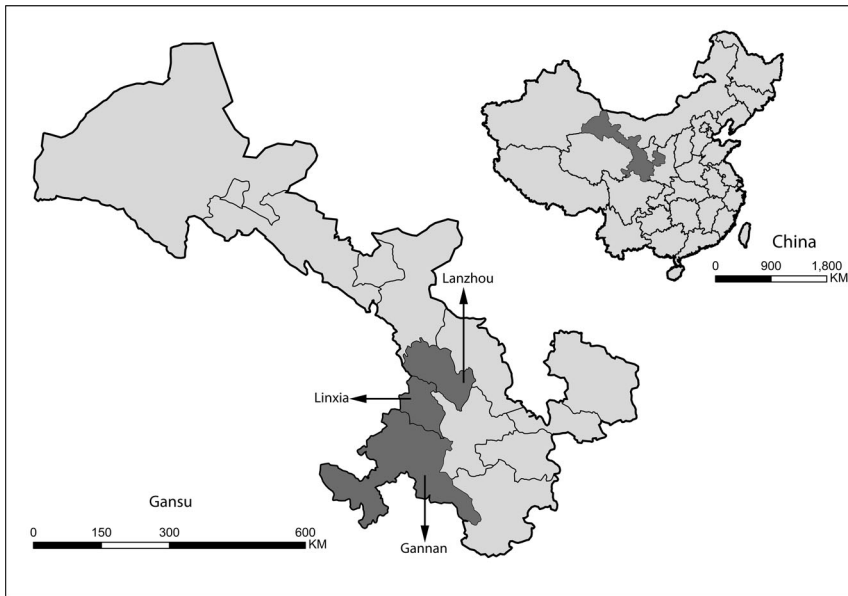
Our study took place in Lanzhou city (Lanzhou), Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture (Linxia), and Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (Gannan), all in Gansu Province of North West China (NWC). The dominant cultures in these cities/prefectures are Han, Muslim, and Tibetan, respectively. Gansu is situated in the buffer area between the Tibetan and Loess Plateaus and the ancient Silk Road where Han Chinese, Persians, Arabs, Mongols, and Tibetans have repeatedly encountered each other. Due to the long history of frontier contacts, Gansu retains a highly heterogeneous mix of

ethnic groups in the present day. We discuss Han and Hui migrants in Lanzhou; Han, Hui, and Dongxiang migrants in Linxia; and Han and Tibetan migrants in Gannan.

By “migrants”, the authors are referring to all *liudongrenkou* (floating population) who do not have local *hukou* (household registration). In China, the *hukou* system has been applied since 1958 as a means of controlling population flows. To have *hukou* means to be eligible for urban social benefits such as low-rent housing and medical insurance. The “floating population” comprises people who live in places where they are not officially registered. Some migrants may also be known as *nongmingong* (rural–urban migrant workers); these are low-skilled laborers with little education who carry out the “Three-D” jobs: dirty, dangerous, and demeaning. This type of work is routinely shunned by the local population. Most migrants therefore live in informal housing, such as urbanizing villages and peri-urban areas. Urbanizing villages refer to the semi-urbanized spaces which have been transformed from traditional villages during rapid urban sprawl. Although urbanizing villages are found within the cities or towns, they retain rural characteristics in terms of residents and buildings. The low rent and cost of living make urbanizing villages the first choice for the migrants who work and cannot afford high rent in the cities. We conducted our fieldwork in six urbanizing village regions and peri-urban areas in Lanzhou, Linxia, and Gannan between August and November, 2013, and October and November, 2015. The fieldwork was organized by the authors and carried out with the help of students from local universities as well as key informants who had have high prestige and familiarity with the residents and the condition of local communities – most notably *ji sheng zhuan gan* (JSZG, 计生专干, special workers for family planning) and *liu dong zhuan gan* (LDZG, 流动专干, special workers for floating population). These government officials in sub-district administrations work closely with migrants every day and are familiar with local floating populations.

Interviewees were mainly chosen through a snowballing method. Some Dongxiang and Tibetans were reluctant to express themselves in Mandarin. The interviewees in Linxia and Gannan were therefore allowed to use their own languages and their interviews were organized, interpreted, and translated by two Tibetan students. Our total of 59 interviews included 9 Han and 7 Hui migrants in Lanzhou; 8 Han, 10 Hui, and 4 Dongxiang migrants in Linxia; 5 Han and 16 Tibetan migrants in Gannan, some of who were visited more than once, and 11 key informants. All participants were over age 21 and had lived in their destination cities for at least two years. All the participants had engaged in both inter- and intra-group interactions during their migration process, and they all had long-term intentions to settle in the region. The in-depth interviews were semi-structured and conversational, always starting with questions on their migration experience, job search, and living conditions.





**Figure 2.** Research areas. Source: Made by one of the authors.

In some instances, where possible, we visited interviewees at their workplace. We focused on questions pertaining to the three elements of migrants' ethnic identity and acculturation developed from our theoretical framework. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Transcripts were translated in order to maintain their original meanings to the greatest degree possible.

### **A tale of three cities – I: Lanzhou**

As the capital city of Gansu Province and a central city of NWC, Lanzhou (Figure 2) attracts many migrants from across China but mainly from the Northwest. The Muslim clusters are mostly situated in the west of the city, in Xiaoxihu district. As mentioned above, the earliest Muslim immigration dates to around the tenth century, when numerous Muslim groups from Arabia, Persia, and central Asia engaged in commercial activity, manual work, and cultural communications via the Silk Road. The Hui originate from the descendants of these travelers who had settled and merged with locals and other groups under the unifying banner of Islam (Gladney 1996). Despite Lanzhou's long history of multi-ethnic cohabitation (mainly Han and Hui), Han is unequivocally the dominant ethnic group in terms of number (comprising nearly 95.6% of the population, according to The Sixth National Census), culture, and economy.

***"I am not sure if I really have a strong sense of being Han."***

Around one hundred years ago, the construction of the Chinese Han identity was advocated by Chinese nationalists as part of a nation-building effort to motivate feelings of unity and to reduce the possibility of national disintegration (Gladney 2000). Today, most Han people believe that Han identity is *the* Chinese national identity and vice versa (Dikötter 1990). When we asked about their daily contacts with locals, one interviewee provided the following illustration:

I am used to it because I am a *xi bei ren* [person from the Northwest] ... I am not sure if I really have a strong feeling of being Han. I probably feel like a Han only when I am dealing with a Hui ... they are minority, you know, you do not always associate with them. ... I began to notice that they were Hui when I was informed, but that's it ... I don't have any problem when dealing with the Hui because it makes no difference. (Interviewee 1, Han, male, 51, small restaurant owner, 8-year stay, August 2013)

Traditional Chinese social structures generally organize people into clans or communities attached to their lands of residence rather than by ethnicity. The Han group, as Ma (2007) argues, is highly politicized and arbitrarily assembled. In fact, the cultural distinctions between two Han migrants from different places may be more pronounced than between a Han and a minority migrant (Wu 1991). Harrell (1990) asserted that Han Chinese generally do not perceive that they are ethnically different from the mainstream culture. This is very similar to white people in American society who have been portrayed as both "unmarked" and the standard of the society in terms of specific behaviors and attitudes (Skop 2016). The Han identity also seems "unmarked" because it is not self-perceived as an ethnic group or a sub-group in Chinese society. This is because the self-perception of being a Han does not always present symbolic meanings. Our observations in Lanzhou also support this assertion. The Han-Hui inter-group contacts can be described as a trigger for Han migrant identity. The appearance of the Han identity is a response to Han-Hui interaction rather than an inherent sense of Han identity. In inter-group contacts, Han migrants' perceptions of identity merely serve to draw a boundary between self and other, rather than to self-label as "Han". That is to say, it is other-determined rather than self-determined. The result of this othering process fails to generate a sense of belonging from which Han migrants could benefit because "it makes no difference" (interviewee 1). In fact, they appear to be unaware of the concept of ethnic identity applied to themselves in a place where they are the majority.

***"I know I am Hui and I never forget it."***

Berlie (2004) argued that the Hui are relatively more Sinicized and secular than to other Chinese frontier Muslims (e.g. Uyghurs and Kazaks) because

they share the Han language (Chinese), they generally identify themselves as both Muslim and Chinese, and are seemingly better adapted to Chinese society. Nevertheless, many Hui insist that they have inherited a strong sense of belonging from their ancestors. They perceive a shared history and are closely tied to their ethnic identity. When we asked how they perceive their Hui identity, one Hui migrant originally from Linxia offered an illustrative response:

My Hui identity is not something that appeared suddenly, I know I am Hui and I never forget it ... I do put my Hui fellows first when I do business. But this is easy to understand, every nationality has its own culture and so do we. ... For example, we can sell meat to locals, but we do not buy any food from them because it is not *qingzhen* (清真, halal). (Interviewee 2, Hui, male, 28, peddler, 4-year stay, August 2013)

As indicated by interviewee 2, the perception of Hui identity is spontaneous for many Hui migrants while the representations of Hui identity are seen as tenacious and inflexible. The outward manifestation of Hui identity is largely presented through the performance of religious taboos, for instance, the avoidance of pork-related products. Not only do Hui migrants avoid consuming pork but they also avoid even using the word “pork” (猪肉); instead of using the phrase “big meat” (大肉). The Chinese word *fei* (肥) is replaced with *zhuang* (壮) because *fei* is usually used to describe pork and is considered embarrassing and likely to cause disrespect while *zhuang* means strong or robust. Furthermore, as interviewee 2 emphasized, food produced by non-Muslims is shunned because it is not *qingzhen* (Halal, literally means “pure and true”; Chuah 2012). These taboos and the concept of “pure and true” are used and even exaggerated and simplified to represent sufficient conditions for many Hui migrants to establish an ethnic boundary with non-Hui people. It is important to mention that these taboos are accepted and defined as an ethnic boundary. Individuals who ignore the taboos do so at the cost of being ostracized by Hui communities. The inherent perception of Hui identity and the sense of belonging to the Hui group are mainly rooted in their religion practice.

Gladney (2003) contended that the Hui identity could be understood largely through their religious identity, or more generally, their ethnic identity is their religious identity. We confirmed this to be the case during our interview process in NWC. In fact, Hui migrants who claimed to be Hui were automatically stereotyped as Muslims by both Muslim and non-Muslim groups most of the time. It almost becomes a social consensus that Islam is supposed to be the most important precondition and the essence of Hui identity in Lanzhou. The performances of Hui identity concentrate on a series of collective actions such religious practices, but also by the areas they choose to dwell. One interviewee from Ningxia (Muslim region) remarked on the sense of community derived from the location of his home in Lanzhou:

The first thing I did when I arrived at Lanzhou was to find a Muslim community and a mosque .... People from there are always helpful. It's not just me; all Hui migrants do this ... it also helps us get to know the place and do our *gong ke* (five pillars of Islam). (Interviewee 3, Hui, male, around 40, a small restaurant owner, 7-year stay, August 2013)

Like interviewee 3, many also mentioned the Muslim community and mosques as the key markers of Hui identity. They express their distinct dwelling preferences in their selection of certain areas in the city, as shown by their inclination to concentrate in small groups in traditional Muslim communities. These Muslim communities and mosques (as outward symbols) serve as symbolic markers of Hui identity at the group level in a non-Muslim-dominant society. As interviewee 3 commented, the first ports of call for many Hui migrants, especially new arrivals, are typically the traditional Muslim communities such as the urbanizing villages in the Xiaoxihu area of the Qilihe district in Lanzhou. In these communities, Hui migrants carry out economic activities with strong ethnic associations, such as the production of halal food and leather, and follow Islamic religious practices, such as listening to preaching by imams or studying in mosques (Figure 3). The Hui communities not only offer a neighborhood environment for these migrants but also give symbolic meaning to Hui identity (Ke 2001). This settlement pattern of living in the Islamic bolsters a collective identity and reduces the strangeness of a new environment. Given that the Hui migrants' main socioeconomic activities are conducted within the communities, this may also hinder opportunities for inter-group contact and build cultural barriers against the host society. However, not every Hui migrant admitted to being Muslim, nor did every Hui migrant live in a Hui community. One female Hui migrant from Shaanxi province told a different story about her attitude towards Hui identity:

You could say I am a Hui but it is not accurate to say I am a Muslim. Am I? I hardly ever pray or fast.

I can't even memorize the *shahada* ... I would say that to me these are habits, not really religion ... I never eat non-halal food, simply because I have never eaten it before. ... It is not true that I do not want to fit in. ... You know, it would cause trouble for others when eating out with my non-Muslim friends. They always ask me if I am Muslim when I mention that I do not eat pork or other non-halal food. (Interviewee 4, Hui, female, 24, waitress, 3-year stay, October 2013).

As mentioned previously, even though some Hui migrants may not practice Islam, the Hui are generally perceived as Muslim by their own communities. Therefore, it is intriguing that interviewee 4 identified herself as Hui but not as Muslim. Her comments remind us of Wright's finding of a woman who refused to be stereotyped and labeled as a "typical Mexican woman" (1997).



**Figure 3.** One of the entrances of the Hui community (top left), the mosque for praying and studying (top right) and the Muslim market inside of the Hui community. Source: Photographed by Peter Duijven and Bo Zhang in September, 2013, in Lanzhou.

Interviewee 4's identification as Hui but not Muslim may reflect her disapproval of the stereotype associating Hui identity with Islam. For her, the Hui identity – praying, fasting, the food taboo, and other religious performances – seem to have lost their religious meaning. At least in her view, her Hui identity relates more to customs which may have influenced her for many years rather than to an Islamic identity with which she was born. The interviewee herself also questioned the accuracy of being labeled a Muslim because of her non-pork diet. Gladney (1996) discusses how the

pork diet is portrayed as taboo and unclean; the non-pork diet is found mainly in NWC where the Hui population is numerous. It is safe to say that the non-pork diet in NWC is a necessary but insufficient condition to draw the boundary between Hui communities and non-Muslims, in this context, the Han. Although interviewee 4's statement provides an interesting anecdote of a person who would prefer to be assimilated into the host society at the expense of stripping away the religious meaning of her ethnic identity, social stereotyping by the mainstream could also act as an exclusionary force, continuously obstructing her attempts to gain admission into the dominant culture of the host society.

For many Hui respondents, we observed that their understanding of their ethnic identity is largely anchored in Islam which they perceive as the essence of Hui identity. These perceptions tend to be tenacious and subconscious which may result in Hui migrants' following a separation strategy, maintaining their identity and self-consciously setting themselves off from the dominant culture. In a more general sense, many Hui respondents have created a sense of place through collective behaviors such as living in close proximity to mosques where they can follow what they perceive as essential and authentic traits of the Hui identity. The perception of Islam as an intrinsic part of Hui identity may lead to in-group isolation of Hui migrants who deny a religious identity and as a result may no longer be regarded as members of the Hui community. On the one hand, the Hui migrants who accept their Muslim identity as the essence of Hui identity may greatly benefit from the Hui communities and adapt new lives at the very beginning of migration. But on the other hand, they may be "trapped" in the Hui communities over the long run because of the isolation between Hui communities and the host society. Thus, sticking to what most of the Hui migrants have perceived as the essence of Hui identity may negatively influence their attempts to assimilate and integrate with the host society if they choose to do so.

### **A tale of three cities – II: Linxia**

Linxia, in ancient times known as Hezhou ([Figure 2](#)), is the largest Muslim center in Gansu Province and is known as "Little Mecca in China". It links Lanzhou in the North and Gannan in the South and used to be the most important junction on the South Silk Road for Muslim commercial activity in NWC. Linxia has also played a crucial role in the development of Muslim culture and religion since antiquity. Muslims and non-Muslims traditionally lived separately, but these former habitation patterns are changing today. The major Muslim groups in Linxia are the Hui and the Dongxiang, accounting for 31.6% and 26.0% of the population, respectively, while the Han group makes up 39.7% (The Sixth National Census). Culturally, the Dongxiang are comparable to the Hui and were officially categorized as



Hui until the 1950s. The name Dongxiang literally refers to a place and literally means “East Village”. The Dongxiang people have their own spoken language, which is akin to Mongolian but incorporates Chinese, Persian, and Arabic words and expressions. Most Dongxiang people use the Chinese formal writing system. For Dongxiang people, their ethnic identity is also connected to Islam. Although Muslims may never be the politically dominant group in any places in China under the current communist regime, our observations of Linxia sufficiently inform us that Muslims are a relatively dominant group in terms of economic and cultural activity. To Han migrants, the exotic and symbolic local landscapes (for instance, there are over 3000 mosques densely distributed across the city of Linxia) and interaction with locals undoubtedly evokes a sense of cultural alienation and the exotic.

***“I am a majority and they are minorities, I am aware of that.”***

In Linxia, it is the common view that whenever someone mentions minorities (*shaoshu*), he or she does not mean all ethnic minority groups, but only Muslim groups (e.g. Hui or Dongxiang). For many Han migrants, it is practically unavoidable to have at least limited interaction with minorities in their daily lives. For instance, most of the food-related businesses (except pork) and restaurants are run by Muslims. All the Han respondents in Linxia claimed that they were more or less aware of the concept of ethnic identity and the Islamic cultural context of the host society. However, most Han respondents seemed to focus on the ethnic identity of other groups rather than their own. The awareness of Han identity in Linxia is triggered by the Muslim *cultural* context of the host society in Linxia rather than by *personal* contacts in Lanzhou. When we asked about their daily contacts with locals and their perceptions of Han and Hui identity and the feeling towards the city, two of our interviewees from Shaanxi clarified:

You have to know whether unfamiliar people are *duoshu* [majority] or *shaoshu* [minority] before you do anything with them ... I am not *jiangjiu* 讲究 [picky] ... I do business with minorities, I eat halal food ... Still I am a majority and they are minorities, I am aware of that ... Sometimes it feels awkward to say Han or Hui, as though we are divided *minzu* [ethnic groups] ... I am a majority and so what ... *minzu zhengce* (preferential policies) is only for minorities, we do not benefit from it ... Han identity does not mean anything. (Interviewee 5, Han, male, around 40, furniture maker, 2-year stay, September 2013).

I am not often in contact with minorities because my business partners are all Han ... I never say “pork” or “pig meat” in Linxia. If I have to say it, I say “big meat.” On the other hand, I cannot say “big meat” in front of Hui people ... I will think before saying it, even when I’m not speaking to a Hui ... To be honest, one Hui is not Hui, only two Hui are Hui ... they *zhuang* [pretend] to be religious to show to us, we also pretend that we believe (Actually, we do not believe) they are serious [about their religion and identity] ... but they

[Muslim minorities] are truly *tuanjie* [united] ... I mean they can rely on the other Hui when they need help ... we (Han) cannot. (Interviewee 6, Han, male, 30, vehicle painter, 5-year stay, September 2013)

Han migrants in Linxia seem to be more cautious than when they are in Lanzhou about their behavior. However, most Han respondents were indifferent about their Han identity. Ethnic identity, in Han migrant eyes, seems only to be something associated with non-Han or minorities. Although Han are not the “majority” or at least not dominant in terms of local population, economy, and culture in Linxia, they are still labeled as a “majority”. In fact, most Han migrants do not perceive themselves as a vulnerable minority in Linxia. Yet we also observed in these interviewees a resistance to being designated as “the majority” because the perception of “superiority” by other groups could constrict communications and lead to psychological discomfort for all involved. Interviewee 5’s understanding of ethnic identity corresponds to whether or not he benefits from his supposedly superior Han identity. His statement that “Han identity does not mean anything” demonstrates his dissatisfaction with preferential policies for minorities, especially in non-Han dominant regions. To many Han respondents, minority migrants have enjoyed the privileges granted only because of their minority status not because of the specific context they find themselves in. Apparently, Han migrants do not consider the “minority” as minority because Linxia is, according to some Han interviewees, “their [Muslim] place where they are the host and not vulnerable”. Indeed, many Han respondents seem to perceive a sense of unfairness because their Han identity provides no solid privileges, even when they are not the majority population. The complaints about preferential policies for minorities to some extent reflect the self-perception that the Han identity is hollow.

The unique Muslim cultural context in Linxia becomes an essential social norm which regulates Han respondents’ behaviors. To most Han respondents, the ethnic boundary between Han and Hui or other Muslim groups was simply defined by the presence of Islamic religious taboos. Almost all the Han interviewees stereotyped Islamic taboos as the essence of Hui or Dongxiang identities, and neglected to consider the multiple interrelated layers and nuanced meanings of ethnic identity. The purpose of Han respondents in negotiating ethnic boundaries is to distinguish themselves from Muslims rather than to form and explore the richness of the Han identity. Interviewee 6’s perception of ethnic identity reflects the ineffable yet well-known stereotypes and prejudice among many Han migrants towards Muslims in this region. This is understandable because most of the Han Chinese are atheists coming from the single ethnic region and they have rarely met anyone who is not Han before migrating to Linxia. Many Han migrants take it for granted that the concept of ethnic identity is hypocritical and should not be taken



serious because their own perception of Han identity is situational and hollow. More importantly, his assertion suggests a perceived absence of essential and unified meanings in Han identity.

Although not all Han respondents believed that Muslims strictly abide by basic religious and cultural rules (e.g. the food taboo), especially when they are alone, all respondents nevertheless indicated that they had already changed their behavior to accommodate Islamic taboos. Moreover, they also remarked that they would consider their wording of Islamic taboos before speaking, even when conversing with another Han. Joniak-Lüthi (2016) discusses a similar case in Southern Xinjiang where Han migrants are blurring the boundaries and acculturating to Islamic and Uyghur conventions, even though these Han migrants are reluctant to admit to integrating and assimilating. However, the cultural context hardly provokes their self-awareness for the Han identity and affection to Han group. In fact, as we discovered in Lanzhou, there are few cultural traits that are perceived as the essence of Han identity by Han migrants, let alone traits that associate their attachment to the Han group. This characteristic allows Han migrants to integrate easily into other groups as long as the cultural context does not exclude them. In our study, we observe that the performance of Han identity is highly situated by the local cultural context, and by the act of moving from a Han-dominated to a relatively Muslim-dominated society. The performance changes noted in Han interviewees' behavior are responses to the local cultural context rather than enactments of identity with the Han ethnicity. Similar to Lanzhou, Han respondents in Linxia regarded Han identity as rather weak, although they were more receptive to the concept of them having an ethnic identity.

### ***"We are Muslims" vs. "Muslims are not all the same"***

Although within Hui community the salience of religious identity can vary dramatically, most Hui migrants are Muslims. Compared to what we have observed in Lanzhou, religion in Linxia plays a more complicated role among different Muslim ethnic groups in their ethnic boundary negotiations. When asked about where migrants lived and how they perceived their ethnic identities, we were told:

I prefer living with *shaoshu* ... I mean not just Hui, it is OK as long as with Muslims ... After all, we are all Muslims. (Interviewee 7, Dongxiang, female, around 30, bread seller, 5-year stay, September 2013)

Another noted that:

Living in Linxia is not easy, I mean, not easy to fit in to a Muslim group ... It is not just your ethnic identity, you know, Muslims are not all the same, we speak different languages and have different beliefs ... I believe in *xinjiao* [新教, New

Teaching] but there are not many *xinjiao* believers around me. It is different from *laojiao* [老教, Old Teaching]. We don't hate each other, but we are still different ... They do not see the differences; they just think we are Muslims. (Interviewee 8, Hui, male, driver, 29, 3-year stay, September 2013)

The concepts mentioned by interviewee 8 are the *Qadim* (*Laojiao*) and *Ikhwan* (*Xinjiao*), the two largest Islamic sects in Linxia. The *Qadim*, one of the oldest sects, accepts many Chinese traditional values such as Confucianism, while the *Ikhwan* strives to be less influenced by the alienated cultural forms like the customs from Taoism and Confucianism and should follow the Koran and Hadith and go back to the essential truths of Islam (Lipman 1984). The local Imam from the Laohua mosque, the most important *Qadim* mosque, in contrast to the Xinhua mosque, the most important *Ikhwan* mosque in Linxia (Figure 4), used the expression “*laojiao bulao, xinjiao buxin* [The old teaching is not that old while the new teaching is not that new]” to explain the divergences between these two sects. In a strict sense, the members of the two sects do not visit each other's mosques, in extreme cases they do not even intermarry and treat each other as heterodox.

Stroup has argued that religious unification decreases the salience of ethnic identity in order to increase the importance of religious identity (Stroup 2017; see also Jacobson 1997). For instance, many Muslim respondents underscored the boundary between Muslim and non-Muslims while downplaying their Hui or Dongxiang identity when associating with non-Muslims. This religious collectiveness is known as *ummah*, a notion which allies all Muslims together into one single group. As in Lanzhou, many Muslim interviewees in Linxia also expressed strong affection for their group by emphasizing the importance of religious practices and the preference for living with their fellow Muslim



**Figure 4.** The *Qadim* (left) and *Ikhwan* (right) mosques. Source: Photographed by Bo Zhang in October, 2013, in Linxia.

near mosques, or in Chinese, a *fang*, a traditional Muslim residence, to gain a sense of belonging. In this case, the formation and performance of a Hui or Dongxiang identity are largely weakened through the notion of *ummah*. In other words, *ummah* downplays the salience of Hui and Dongxiang identity through merging the boundaries of ethnic identities. Through the notion of *ummah*, many Muslim migrants from different ethnic groups are categorized by others and self-perceived as one united Muslim group during interactions with non-Muslims. The multi-sectarian development of Islamic schools in Linxia undermines the salience of Hui and Dongxiang identities by re-establishing boundaries in terms of different Islamic sects, that is to say, migrants' perception of their sectarian identity may impede their ethnic group solidarity. Interviewee 8's statement that "Muslims are not the same" illustrates how the boundaries of different sectarian identities embedded in the religious identity divide the migrants into different sects by undermining their perception of *ummah*. It is not uncommon for non-Muslims to ignore the divergences between Muslim sects, while Hui or Dongxiang migrants will sometimes perceive otherwise. Interviewee 8 would regard the *Ikhwan* as the in-group and relegate his ethnic identity to the background as less important in his self-identification. Due to the diverse Islamic sects in Linxia, sectarian categories become salient to many migrants in their perception of ethnic identity. Their sectarian identity emerges as the core element of ethnic identity in Hui or Dongxiang groups. The othering process performed within the same ethnic group could therefore be vital in understanding the acculturation of Hui and Dongxiang migrants. Hui or Dongxiang migrants may face separation or marginalization within their own ethnic groups, despite the fact that most of them are Muslims living in Linxia, the Muslim cultural context.

### ***"I have to pretend that I am a devout Muslim"***

There are also some Hui migrants who are unwilling to practice Islam in Linxia. However, it is more difficult to be assimilated or integrated into a non-Muslim cultural identity within a Muslim-dominated cultural context. A Hui migrant from Linxia bemoaned the fact that:

I don't want to mention my ethnic identity; it creates distance for others ... Everyone thinks that if you are Hui you have to follow the routine, otherwise you are considered offensive ... To be honest, I really don't identify myself as Muslim ... But I have to pretend that I am a devout Muslim ... You know, you would be judged by both sides. (Interviewee 9, Hui, male, maintainer, 33, 7-year stay, September 2013)

Like interviewee 4, interviewee 9 is self-categorized as Hui but denies his Muslim identity. The notion that Hui are born to be Muslims is reinforced in a traditional Muslim society like Linxia; Hui identity is created and supported by the local social environment within which Islamic rules are a

deeply entrenched tradition. Most of the times both Han and Hui communities tend to stereotype all Hui as Muslims. Therefore, for many Hui migrants in Linxia to deny Muslim identity embedded in their ethnic identity could be perceived by Hui Muslims as a denial of the entire Hui community. The results of interviewee 9's rejection of his religious identity could bring intense pressure to bear from both sides, especially from the host society. As his statement "I have to pretend that I am a devout Muslim" demonstrates, his behavior is inconsistent with his perception and affection, a split that he undertakes to avoid prejudice from both sides.

Lacking other strong representative identity symbols, such as a distinct language and historical territories, religion therefore becomes the most crucial factor that influences Hui and Dongxiang migrants' ethnic identities. Most Hui and Dongxiang migrants place their religious identity above ethnic identity, especially when associating with non-Muslims. We would assert too that these ethnic identities are enhanced and magnified under the influence of Islam. Additionally, the development of different Islamic sects in Linxia has led to a state of multi-sectarianism among many Hui and Dongxiang migrants. As sectarian identities become salient to their ethnic identity, another "othering" process is conducted to label Muslim migrants in terms of their sects. It has been difficult for Muslims to acculturate to non-Muslims under the circumstances surrounding the strong hold and exclusivity of Islam on Muslim migrants; therefore, for most Hui and Dongxiang migrants, separation from Han society seems to be the only choice.

### **A tale of three cities – III: Gannan**

Gannan (Figure 2), the homeland of traditional Tibetan nomads, is situated in southern Gansu Province, adjoining the north-eastern part of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and Aba, Sichuan province. Its marginalized geographical location determines that it is less influenced by traditional Tibetan values and culture and relatively more secularized compared to the core areas of the Tibet region due to the regular cultural contacts received throughout history. Correspondingly, the religious surveillance by the state in Gannan is much lighter. For instance, we saw portraits of the 14th Dalai Lama in some Tibetan people's houses, something unimaginable for Tibetans living in Lhasa, the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). The earliest Han-Tibetan contact dates back to the commercial links formed during the reign of Emperor Wu of Han (B.C.E. 157–187). Later interactions were mainly commercial, generally through the exchange of Han silk, tea, porcelain, dye, and Tibetan yaks, highland goats, and horses (Figure 5). The establishment of Labrang Monastery and Milarepa (or Nine-layer) Pavilion (Figure 5) in the later 1800s led to the building of informal settlements nearby and the appearance of the new "Congla" commodity trading markets, and the



**Figure 5.** The Yak and highland goats market (top), the Tibetan community next to the Tibetan architectural complex (down left) and the Milarepa (nine-layer) Pavilion (down right). Source: Photographed by Bo Zhang in October, 2013, in Gannan.

subsequent migration of Han to this region. The modern Han migration to the Tibetan regions was state-orchestrated in the “Down to the Countryside” movement during the later 1960s and early 1970s and the Western Development Campaign to support the development of under-developed areas in the 1980s (Fischer 2008). Today in Henzuo City, the major Han settlement in Gannan, Han people from all over China are self-promoted migrant workers rather than state-sanctioned.

***“I do not want to distinguish between Han and Tibetan.”***

Chinese central authority has adopted and enforced a national amalgamation policy in the Tibetan Autonomous Areas<sup>1</sup> (TAA) since the 1980s, especially through the Western Development Campaign. The recent wave of so-called

socialist modernization is to divert the attention of Tibetan people away from religion and politics and instead to the economic activities through investment and market reforms in the TAA (Levine 2015). However, the main result of economic amalgamation has been the unrestrained flow of non-Tibetan populations into urban areas in the TAA, which has led to non-Tibetans controlling the urban economy (Fischer 2008). Gannan is no exception. Many Han migrants travel to Hezuo to earn money because it is much easier for them to find jobs and receive a higher payment in Hezuo city, the major urban area in Gannan, compared with local Tibetans. Consistent with Yeh (2013), we also found that Han migrants consider themselves “helpers” who assist in the development of the local economy to the benefit of local society. When asked about daily contact with Tibetans, one Han lady who moved to Gannan with her husband, a bricklayer from Hunan Province, expounded:

Tibetans are easy-going people, honest and kind-hearted ... Like my Tibetan landlord, she does not speak good Chinese, but that's normal, you are in their place and you should follow their rules here ... Besides, Tibetan culture is quite good. For my part, I have learned some simple Tibetan words ... I go to her when I have problems. I do not like to distinguish Han and Tibetan ... I mean what you can get from your Han identity ... And it would be strange if you told me I am a Han ... I am from Hunan ... It is difficult to fit in but still possible if you want to. (Interviewee 10, Han, female, around 30, waitress, 5-year stay, November 2013).

Interviewee 10 was generous in her praise of Tibetans, including her landlord, going so far as to express reliance on her and attachment to Tibetans in general. In fact, the Tibetan identity has been perceived variously such as authentic, unsophisticated, innocent, even masculine (Hillman and Henfry 2006; Yeh 2007). These stereotypes were argued as the representations of Han pursuing and contesting a sense of Tibetanness during the ethnic boundary negotiations with local Tibetans (Zhu and Qian 2015). Interviewee 10's description of Tibetans as easy-going, honest, and kind-hearted is apparently in keeping with stereotypes. Han migrants are easily influenced by the stereotype of Tibetan culture as mysterious and attractive which has come into vogue among inland Chinese in the last several decades (Choedup 2015). Interviewee 10 also insisted that she gained no benefit from her supposedly “privileged” Han identity and described Han identity as remaining in name only. Her Han identity was no more than an appellation which hardly has any influence on her attachment to another alienated cultural form she was experiencing. For interviewee 10, the Han ethnic boundary is blurred and insignificant. Furthermore, although the linguistic barrier was not considered to be a decisive obstacle, it can be a genuine barrier in Han migrants' acculturation to Tibetan culture (Hu and Salazar 2008). The Tibetan language acquisition of interviewee 10,



however, is superficial. Thus, we may not conclude that Tibetan language acquisition reflects a willingness to integrate or assimilate with Tibetan culture, but rather it echoes our discoveries in both Lanzhou and Linxia: a weak perception of Han identity which does not function as an obstacle to Han migrants' acculturation.

Although the aforementioned case that many Han migrant seeks to acculturate into Tibetan culture is atypical, it seems that the Tibetan cultural context is generally perceived as less exclusive and more accessible to the Han than the Islamic culture. It may be therefore less arduous for Han migrants to be acculturated into the Tibetan cultural context if they are willing to. Mackerras (1998) shows how Islam and Tibetan culture in China approach labor and production quite differently. Islam endorses individual economic actions while Tibetan Buddhism bars its clergies from market activity and advocates that people, even if poor, should accept their destinies and chase inner peace. Han migrants we interviewed in urban areas are generally perceived as less economically threatening in the Tibetan context than from the Islamic one. For instance, our respondents in Lanzhou and Linxia told us that “*Huihui* (the Hui ethnic group) are good businessmen” and “they are astute, you can consume halal food but you do not consume anything they told you, you can never take advantage of them”. The Tibetans, meanwhile, have long been portrayed by state media and tourism propaganda as living a backward-looking and surreal lifestyle and indifferent to money (Qian and Zhu 2016). We even heard from a local Tibetan that Tibetan Buddhism temple was also open to Han believers. The historical religious connections between Han and Tibetan Buddhism have also gained greater acceptance of Tibetan culture performances and representations.

### ***“I do not speak Han Hua.”<sup>2</sup> vs “I have to speak Han Hua.”***

When three of our interviewers attempted to strike up a conversation with a Tibetan lady after buying fruit from her grocery store, she turned them down with a single sentence in Chinese: “I do not speak Han Hua.” Her rejection of the Han interviewers may have been deliberate. Our Han interviewers regularly received a “cold shoulder” from Tibetan migrants over the period of fieldwork in Gannan. Two Tibetan students who were assigned to the second trial confirmed our suspicion when one from Diebu (a town in Gannan next to Sichuan province) responded as follows:

I can speak some Han Hua but I do not want to ... this is not the grassland, and you have to deal not only with other Tibetans but also with Han, Hui and others ... It is OK to talk with strangers ... I am not against them ... It is not easy for us to get a job ... It is OK to work with other groups but they [Han] do not want to hire us ... city life is difficult and we do not even have time to visit a temple ... In the countryside we could earn some money but

we do not want our children to remain herders forever. (Interviewee 11, around 40, female, grocery shop owner, 8-year stay, November 2013)

For most rural Tibetans, the Tibetan identity is rooted in a sense of local place. The ancient place-based experiences have endowed local places with symbolic meanings to Tibetans (Ying 2014). For instance, we were told by a Tibetan *Liu Dong Zhuan Gan* that many rural Tibetans who live in a pasturing area generally believe that every mountain and lake is sacred and has different meanings locally. To many rural Tibetans, their local and regional identity is an indispensable part of the Tibetan identity. The local and regional identity that embedded in the Tibetan identity is constructed through the local places where they are connected to the local gods and spirits. In contrast, the Tibetan identity assembles the local and regional identity through Tibetan Buddhism but does not eliminate them. (Samuel 2012). The representations and authenticity of Tibetan identity nowadays are still partly performed through divine rituals with the help of the Tibetan Buddhist clergies (Yeh 2013). Thus, to many Tibetan migrants who move to urban areas, the religious rituals that affiliated with their daily lives could only be performed in the temple or through the clergy. Tibetan Buddhism, as addressed by Samuel (2012), is a religion of practice. Constraints on religious practices, as interviewee 11 remarked on how little time she had to visit a temple, may signify a cultural decline and thus ruin migrants' ability to express their identity as Tibetans.

Even after eight years sojourning, interviewee 11 remains cautious when dealing with Han counterparts. As we can see in interviewee 11's comments – "I do not want to," "It is OK," and "I am not against them" – indicate lack of satisfaction and suspicion about living among Han, Hui, and others, which many Tibetan migrants experience when moving to cities. The side effect of a utilitarian pursuit of money in cities on Tibetan identity is profound (Postiglione et al. 2004). Tibetan migrants are vulnerable in terms of employment in cities mainly dominated by the Han economy. Moreover, the Tibetan language and Tibetan Buddhist practices, among other things closely related to Tibetan identity, cannot be fully practiced and may lead to the marginalization of Tibetans. Certainly, the difficulties Tibetan migrants have encountered mirror what interviewee 11 has expressed, and more. A Tibetan from Aba, Sichuan Province with a sound grasp of Mandarin had this opinion about city life and Tibetan identity:

Living in the city is so different ... I have to speak Han Hua [Han language] to be an "urbanized Tibetan" (laughs). Hmm ... I am someone who is typically *Hanhua* [Sinicized] ... I am not saying that we should not be modernized ... we just do not want to be like the Hanren [Han people] ... We want to keep our old traditions. How do we know we are Tibetan if we leave home and do not speak Tibetan anymore ... but you do not have many choices ... you know, we cannot survive just like our ancestors ...



(Interviewee 12, 28, male, small restaurant owner, 6-year stay, October 2013).

Interviewee 12's attitude also reflects the contradictions experienced by other Tibetans. Many Tibetan migrants still struggle against being assimilated by Han society. City life, in their view, spells potential economic, social, and cultural threat from Han society. In order to live in the city that is economically dominated by Han, they may resort to Sinicization. In other words, in cities where the economy is largely monopolized by non-Tibetans, there are no opportunities for Tibetan migrants to selectively adapt; in contrast, Tibetan migrants could only passively accept the Han "formula" to adopt city lives. Most rural Tibetans we interviewed felt that contemporary cities are not authentic Tibetan places, whereas the rural lands such as the grassland plays an essential role in constructing Tibetan identity. However, this does not necessarily imply that they are willing to remain forever in rural areas. Because the reality in rural Tibetan is, as Alai describes,

When it comes to the Tibetan Plateau, to this unique cultural landscape, everything seems to be very simple. It is either good or bad, either civilized or barbaric. Even more troubling is that rural culture is completely turned into a reflection of the morality of the metropolis. Country life is not the paradise of Shangri-la. On the ascending steps close to the Tibetan Plateau, there is much suffering, but the people who have been kept in the dark have not yet learned to express it in their own voices. (Alai 2000, 143)

In fact, young Tibetans are especially drawn to city life. Thus, rather than to argue that the current city life is far removed from the life Tibetans had self-developed for thousands of years, it could instead be that an unexpected urban livelihood stimulates their reminiscence to recall the images of a conventional livelihood on the grassland, where Tibetans had collectively garnered their attachment to.

Unlike Hui migrants, Tibetans have possessed their own historical territories since antiquity. And together with the recent rise in nationalism, the Tibetan landscape, including the rural areas, has been bestowed with collective meanings for Tibetan identity. The implementation of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) "New Socialist Countryside" or resettlement plan (Yeh 2013) in the Tibetan region indeed distances the rural Tibetans from their traditional ways of living which to some extent reinforces their yearning for a traditional lifestyle. Located on the edge of Tibetan region, Gannan may not be like Lhasa or the core Tibetan region which have provided coherent and powerful affiliations for Tibetans for many centuries. The local-based experience becomes essentialized in renegotiating and contesting Tibetanness when they move to Gannan from their hometown. The perception of traditional lifestyle and affective bonds to the rural areas still play an important role in constructing what many Tibetan migrants perceive

as the essence of Tibetan identity. In general, many Tibetan migrants have a strong sense of belonging to their ethnic identity, which is multi-layered and reflected from their local and regional identity.

As a result of Han-dominated urban economies, many Tibetan migrants are indeed in-between: negotiating their Tibetan-ness on the one hand and adapting to the Han cultural context in their destination cities on the other. During fieldwork, many respondents claimed that practicing Tibetan traditions may make them less suited for life in the city; sometimes they even felt incompatible living in Gannan. However, it is doubtful that strong attachment to tradition and grassland identity cannot co-exist with urban lives, because in reality, Tibetans have barely been given the opportunities to develop their own ways of living in the cities. Thus, if living in the cities is ride-sharing with Sinicization and is perceived by Tibetan migrants to constitute a threat to Tibetan values, Tibetan migrants may indeed reject it. Linguistic barriers to some degree exemplify and reinforce stereotyping by both sides, because most Han-Tibetan communication is simplistic and superficial. For Tibetan migrants, neither is the loss of ethnic identity in the city necessarily offset by economic gains. In fact, Han and Tibetans both have distorted perceptions of the government's Tibetan development policy and each other's role in it. Because non-Tibetans control most urban economic activities, many Tibetan migrants who yearn for an urban life believe they are immediately disadvantaged when competing with Han, who possess better money-making skills and greater advantage in the local labor market.

As interviewee 12 said, linguistic ability has allowed him to become an "urbanized Tibetan" claiming to shuttle between Tibetan and Han society. Many Tibetan migrants have already realized the constraints of living in rural Tibet in terms of the difficult habitat, the fragile and degraded environment, the under-developed social and economic conditions, and most importantly, the limited opportunities and access to education for their children. For instance, interviewee 11 did not wish her children to remain in the countryside, even if urban living is associated with Sinicization. Increasingly, many Tibetan migrants move to the city for their children to have a better education. Although living in the city and maintaining Tibetan identity need not be mutually exclusive, it is still difficult for Tibetan migrants to balance "being Tibetan" and "socialist modernization" which may bring a sense of alienation from both. Being urbanized through Sinicization leads to fewer opportunities for Tibetan migrants to create their own economic spaces and at the same time gradually strips away the cultural elements embodied in their ethnic identity. Years of externally driven urban development strategies of central authorities have left little space for Tibetan migrants to actively develop their own internal coping mechanisms in order to adapt to a social and economic context dominated by Han, possibly resulting in their marginalization.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have presented case studies of three cities to demonstrate how migrants perceive their ethnic identity and traced how migrants are perceived in different cultural contexts. There is a long history of describing Han Chinese as “civilized” and “advanced”, while minorities as “primitive” and “backward” in contemporary China (Gladney 1994). How the ongoing ethnic identity negotiation influences migrants’ acculturation in Northwest Chinese cities is therefore important in the face of easy stereotypes. The cases of Han respondents in three cities/prefectures depict that there are hardly any performative representations or symbolic elements that can be perceived as the essence of the Han group. Nor did we find any widely accepted cultures or traditions used to form affective bonds and attachment between individual Han migrants and Han ethnic identity. The perception of Han identity is not inherent but rather a state-making strategy carried out by the Chinese authorities and is highly politicized and variable in its extent and connotations (Ma 2007; Joniak-Lüthi 2013). To some extent, the current preferential policy towards minorities enhances the self-perception that Han identity is porous and even vacuous. In fact, most Han migrants are unaware of their ethnic identity in the context where they are the dominant group. As one LDZG in Linxia told us, the Han show “the least united (*zui bu tuan jie*)” among the groups, even when they are fewer in numbers. We urge and reassert that the traditionally view that unites all the Han under a simple and one-dimensional label should be questioned. Many Han migrants choose to dilute their weakly perceived Han identity and integrate effectively, provided that the cultural context is not exclusive to other groups. Even in relatively exclusive cultural contexts such as the Muslim communities in Lanzhou or the Muslim society in Linxia, many Han migrants still displayed acculturated behaviors. This indeed challenges Hansen’s assertion that as long as the Han migrants are socially and politically dominant group, they are reluctant to adapt the cultural practice of the host society (Hansen 1999).

As revealed in the article, with few exceptions, Hui and Dongxiang migrants prevailingly show a strong sense of belonging to their ethnic identity which is largely represented and performed through Islamic culture and practice. They are less likely to be acculturated than the Han, and are less influenced by the non-Islamic cultural context going so far as to create their own if necessary. Hui migrants who denied their Muslim identity would be considered an out-group and excluded from the Muslim communities. Moreover, cultural contexts in which Muslims are the dominant group have a greater impact on the acculturation of Hui migrants who deny their Muslim identity. This is because such Hui migrants are not only stereotyped by the dominant Muslim society but also by Han society as well. Hundreds of

years of intermarriage and cohabitation experience have made the Hui group the most integrated into Han culture and society which results in the certain degree of secularization. However, secularization does not suggest assimilation. In contrast, the Hui still manifests separation from Han society. In this vein, the scholars who simply treat the Chinese-speaking Muslims as the Chinese or Han who believe in Islam would be counterproductive when studying the negotiation of Hui or Dongxiang identity.

Similar to Hui and Dongxiang migrants, Tibetan migrants in general also have a strong sense of belonging and attachment to their identity. Compared to the other groups, Tibetan identity is multi-dimensionally constructed, place-based, and reciprocally embodied and reflected in traditions such as linguistic, religious practices, and traditional ways of life. Living in cities may be a possible way of “becoming modernized” given the harsh conditions of the Tibetan plateau and the poor and unproductive rural pastoral lands where the Tibetan people have lived for many generations (Hao 2000). In reality, few opportunities are provided for Tibetans to create their own economic space in the cities while urban development strategies have left limited space for them to actively develop their own internal coping mechanisms to adapt to city life that is economically dominated by non-Tibetan groups. In fact, the bitter experience of individual Tibetan migrants in our study reflects the group disempowerment, as Fischer illustrated, the consequences of non-Tibetan controlling the Tibetan local economy “resulting in numerous polarizations, inefficiencies and other perversions” of the Tibetan group in the Tibetan region (2011, p. 63). The group disempowerment, in turn, aggravates the perception of individual Tibetan being marginalized as a result of the contradictions between retaining their own identity and being Sinicized in the city. For Tibetan migrants, the first step to acquire a sense of belonging in a more urban-oriented society may only be achieved in renegotiating their identity through creation of a more Tibetan-involved city economy.

The framework (Figure 1) we have developed could potentially be used to apply social psychology ideas to cultural geography. It focuses in particular on the experience of human subjectivity which is grounded in the perceptions, affections and behavior of the migrants. Although migrants’ ethnic identity is generally portrayed as a perpetual negotiation, we found that the migrants’ understanding of ethnic identities still relies heavily on what they have perceived as the essence of ethnic identity. In other words, the ongoing process of ethnic identity negotiation is largely grounded in what the migrants perceive as the primordial ties from the shared past. In this sense, an interpretive approach may be more appropriate and persuasive than a universalist approach in studying the ongoing negotiation of ethnic identity since it is more aligned with the sense of human agency than with social structure in deciphering meaning and intention. Ethnic identity is negotiated at both the group and the individual level as a relation of dialectical unification in

regard to fixity and fluidity. At the group level, ethnic identity is rather rigid and fixed. It indicates the affective bonds and attachment to the specific ethnic group and is perceived by most of the group members as the social norms which normalize ethnic behavior collectively. At the individual level, ethnic identity can be flowing and contested from one individual to another. In other words, there are large variations among individuals who interpret ethnic identity in terms of their own perception, affection, and behavior. Although Berry's (1992) acculturation strategies model sheds some light on ethnic identity formation through collective actions at a group level, it actually distances us from understanding the variations of ethnic identity at individual level. For instance, this universalist approach may explain why Hui groups follow Muslim routines, but it falls short when clarifying why some individual migrants identify themselves as Hui but refuse to be labeled as Muslims. We suggest combining an interpretive approach for investigating the fluidity of ethnic identity so that we may more accurately advance our understanding of acculturation in future studies.

## Notes

1. Here TAA not only includes Tibetan Autonomous Region but also Tibetan Autonomous areas in other provinces at all administrative levels.
2. In Chinese, the word which literally means the Han language is *Han Hua*, which is pronounced in the way as the word for Sinicization. I use *Han Hua* and *Hanhua* to distinguish them.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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